R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 019 023 FL 000 817

A TECHNIQUE FOR LANGUAGE LABORATORY TESTING.

BY- RUDE, BEN D.

PUB DATE DEC 67

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.24 4P.

DESCRIPTORS- *LANGUAGE LABORATORY USE, *LANGUAGE LABORATORY EQUIPMENT, *LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION, *TEST CONSTRUCTION, *INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS, SPEECH SKILLS, STUDENT TESTING, ORAL COMMUNICATION, TAPE RECORDINGS, GRADING, TEACHING TECHNIQUES,

A TECHNIQUE FOR ORAL TESTING IN THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY IS OUTLINED. TO PROPERLY TEST STUDENTS' ORAL ABILITY, THE TEST SHOULD BE PREPARED LIKE THE LESSONS--CUE OR QUESTION, STUDENT RESPONSE, CORRECT RESPONSE. SO AS NOT TO REQUIRE EXCESSIVE GRADING TIME ON THE TEACHER'S PART, THE LABORATORY SHOULD HAVE FACILITIES TO START AND STOP STUDENT TAPE RECORDERS REMOTELY, AND TO RECORD STUDENT TAPES ON MORE THAN ONE CONSOLE TAPE RECORDER. THE FACT THAT LABORATORIES WITH PROVISIONS FOR TESTING ARE NOT READILY AVAILABLE INDICATES APATHY OR IGNORANCE ABOUT THE LABORATORY'S POTENTIAL AS A TESTING, AS WELL AS A TEACHING, DEVICE. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "LANGUAGE LEARNING," VOLUME 17, DECEMBER 1967, PAGES 151-153. (AF)

ED019023

LANGUAGE LEARNING

A Journal of Applied Linguistics

Vol. XVII, Numbers 3 and 4, December 1967

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Circulation: 2600 in 105 countries

Lithoprint this issue: 3300

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A TECHNIQUE FOR LANGUAGE LABORATORY TESTING

Ben D. Rude
Pasadena City College

SINCE ITS INTRODUCTION shortly after World War II, the language laboratory has won increasing acceptance as a valuable adjunct to language learning. As teachers have come more and more to realize that language exists on the lips rather than on the printed page, the value of the language laboratory in the teaching of oral skills has become increasingly apparent.

An obvious inconsistency exists, however, in that while the language laboratory is often used extensively in the teaching process, teachers by and large are still relying on written tests to measure student progress, ignoring the fact that if a major goal of language teaching is to teach the spoken language, the only really valid test must be an oral test. But the objections to oral tests are many: they are time consuming, difficult to schedule and administer, and highly subjective. This paper presents a technique for oral testing, using the language laboratory, which greatly reduces these undesirable features and offers the distinct advantage of truly testing what has been taught—the students' ability to speak the language.

A language laboratory test may be prepared in the same format as the lessons, consisting of first the cue or question, then the student's response, and finally the correct response, so that the student knows immediately whether or not his response was correct. With most language laboratories, however, there are two major disadvantages to this system. One is the problem of collecting all the students' tapes for later grading. If the teacher has to pick up the individual tapes, much time is wasted, both in collecting and replacing the students' tapes and in threading the twenty or thirty tapes on another recorder for grading. Another problem is the grading time. The teacher must listen not only to the students' responses but also to the cue questions and to the correct responses. In short, for every minute of student voice, the instructor has to listen to approximately two minutes of master voice. Thus, a test involving five minutes of student response would require fifteen minutes to correct. This time can be reduced by one-third if the master response is eliminated from the test, but doing so introduces another problem: the student who is slow to answer a given question may still be speaking when the next question is broadcast and will consequently

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miss the question. Further, a student may simply wait until his neighbor has responded and then repeat his neighbor's response.

These problems can be overcome quite simply with a laboratory that has been designed for language testing as well as teaching. Such a laboratory requires a console from which the teacher is able to stop and restart all student tape recorders simultaneously as well as individually and at which he is able to record the student tapes.

With such a laboratory the teacher prepares a test in the normal manner, with both cue and correct response. He begins the test with all student tape recorders stopped. After playing the test question, he starts all student tape recorders for just long enough to allow the students to respond and then he stops them. The students then know that they are no longer recording and that the next test item is about to be played. The final result is student tapes with only the students' answers recorded.

The second step is the acquisition of the test tapes onto one or more tapes at the console for later grading. After the test has been given, the teacher or an assistant simply starts each student's tape recorder remotely and records his responses on a console tape recorder. With most language laboratories the time required would be the time taken by one student's responses multiplied by the number of students. Thus, a test given to twenty students and consisting of five minutes of response per student would require 100 minutes acquisition time. This time can be shortened greatly, however, if the laboratory has provisions for the remote recording of two or more students' responses simultaneously. If, for example, four students can be recorded simultaneously on either four single-track or on two two-track console tape recorders, the acquisition time will be reduced to 25 minutes. If, in addition, the student and console tape recorders are capable of two-speed operation, the test can be given at 3 3/4 i.p.s. Then the student recorders can be shifted to 7 1/2 i.p.s. and recorded at the console also at 7 1/2 i.p.s. In this case the acquisition time is further reduced by one half.

The foregoing process, of course, requires a laboratory that has facilities to start and stop student tape recorders remotely and to record student tapes on more than one console tape recorder, facilities which few language laboratories presently possess. The remote start-stop feature can be included in the planning of a language laboratory, and existing laboratories can be modified to include this feature by the simple expedient of switches which cut the a.c. power to the student tape transports. This technique, however, is not wholly satisfactory because it does not result in immediate and positive start and stop, and does result in excessive wear on the

motor and capstan wheel. The most efficient method, therefore, requires the use of tape recorders with solenoid-operated pause control at the student positions.

No language laboratory on the market apparently provides all the above features. The Tandberg laboratory probably comes closest, having remote, solenoid-actuated stop-start control of student tape recorders, as well as provisions to record as many student tapes at the console as there are console tape recorders. It does not, however, provide two-speed student tape recorders.

The fact that language laboratories with provisions for testing are not readily available indicates simply that teachers, by and large, have been either apathetic or ignorant of the potential of the language laboratory as a testing as well as a teaching device.